To some, she was a saint. The “fountainhead” of the modern environmental movement, deified almost a half-century after her death.

To her memory are dedicated wildlife refuges and elementary schools, bridges in Pittsburgh and office edifices in Harrisburg … and a training center dormitory in the Federal agency she had to quit in order to write what she truly wanted to write.

To contemporary revisionists who pine for DDT as a regenerated weapon against malaria, she remains a demon, vilified as killer of more human beings across the globe than Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

In fact, Rachel Carson was neither.

And 2012, the 50th anniversary of the publication *Silent Spring*, affords us the opportunity for a critical reexamination of both the woman and her groundbreaking bestseller, written by Carson amid the supercharged Cold War atmosphere of John Kennedy’s “New Frontier.”

It appeared to instant national acclaim and controversy that September, several weeks before the Cuban missile crisis and many years before “Earth Day” launched the modern environmental movement.

The semi-centennial anniversary of *Silent Spring* now provides the change for a deeper, and more-reasoned, national debate. Starting points for any sort of dispassionate discussion of the publication and its resonance, five decades after the firing of its opening salvo, begin with two other books—Priscilla Coit Murphy’s *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of Silent Spring* and William Souder’s soon-to-be-released *On a Farther Shore: The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson*.

Both place the bestseller in the context of its times, divorcing it from today’s polarized rhetoric of left and right, yielding a more reasoned analysis than current political discourse permits.

“… the fact that *Silent Spring* has never gone out of print implies, first, that the work had some exceptional quality rising it above the status of a sensational but passing phenomenon,” Murphy writes. “Had Carson’s warnings been mere hallucination and easily debunked, the media might have been able to generate a flashy public maelstrom, but the squall would have passed quickly. So it is
important to acknowledge that in the esteem of many, her book is a classic of environmentalist writing – at once accessible and intellectually defensible.

“Further, though some of the science may be out-of-date, in the view of many people, the issues she identified are still very much with us, more demanding of resolution than ever.”

These larger questions aside, what does 2012 mean to the employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, from whose ranks Carson rose … against whose legacy we now are judged?

We credit her tenure with a lasting body of writing about the sea and its fisheries, her famed “Conservation in Action” refuge series, and prescience about environmental contaminants. Carson set the stage for the debut of our Endangered Species Program in the early 1970s, and its inaugural cast of DDT-threatened “poster children” now pulled back from the brink of extinction—brown pelicans (Pelecanus occidentalis), peregrine falcons (Falco peregrinus anatum), and American bald eagles (Haliaeetus leucocephalus) among them.

Modern day analysts often forget that Rachel Carson was not the first person to sound a warning against the indiscriminate use of pesticides. Agency news releases stretching back to 1945 document the wildlife impacts that biologists at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and elsewhere first began to note about the new miracle compounds. Carson’s proposal that year to the Reader’s Digest for a review of aerial spraying of pesticides was rebuffed; it would be bravely serialized 17 years later by The New Yorker in a condensed version of Silent Spring, several months before the book’s publication.

Nor was Carson alone. Drawing heavily – occasionally surreptitiously – from her colleagues at Patuxent and other agencies, including anonymous sources deep within the Federal agricultural bureaucracy, Carson gave the rising concern about pesticides its clearest and most articulate voice, as insider then outside looking in.

“… Carson found individuals in key places who, at great risk to their jobs and reputations, were willing to give her confidential information if she protected them. With their private help and that of anonymous friends, Carson’s sleuthing, particularly inside government and other Washington-based institutions, was highly successful,” writes Carson biographer Linda Lear of the myriad sources she tapped.

So, in this semi-centennial year, perhaps this is a convenient and satisfactory starting point for introspection by the next generation of Fish and Wildlife Service employees, inculcated as they are with their annual inoculations of “No Fear” whistleblower training and emphasis on transparency in government.

Perhaps the most relevant, open-ended question in this 50th anniversary of Silent Spring is not “Could the Fish and Wildlife Service ever produce another Rachel Carson?” Rather, “Can the Fish and Wildlife Service produce the people of sufficient conscience and the science of integrity that will make another Rachel Carson possible?”

That, in 2012, should be enough.